The Text is Not Enough: Visibility in Asian diasporic Digital Narratives

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ABSTRACT

Using W.J.T. Mitchell's (1994) "Picture Theory," this article explores the use of the visual image in electronic literature. It examines three recent works that combine multiple media elements. The first, *The Boat* (2015) is an interactive graphic novel by Vietnamese-Australian visual artist Matt Huynh. It is adapted from the short story *The Boat* (2008) by Vietnamese Australian author Nam Le. By comparing the digital adaptation with the source text, I explore contemporary notions of ekphrasis in digital literature. Secondly, I explore Leise Hook's *The Vine and the Fish* (2020), an interactive graphic narrative. Here, I examine not only the interplay between text and image, but also how the piece uses visibility as its central concept (i.e. with the images of the titular vine and fish). Finally, I examine *Reeducated: Inside Xinjiang's Secret Detention Camps* (2021), an 'animated, ambisonic 360 V.R. film that reconstructs the experience of detention and political re-education in Xinjiang, China, guided by the recollections of three men who were caught in what is likely the largest mass internment drive of ethnic and religious minorities since the Second World War' (Huynh, 2022). The work is directed by Sam Wolson and contains illustrations by Matt Huynh. In discussing ekphrasis, American English and media theorist W.J.T. Mitchell (1994) describes three phases: ekphrastic indifference, ekphrastic hope, and ekphrastic despair. The first, ekphrastic indifference, stems from the 'commonsense perception that ekphrasis is impossible', that words can 'cite' but never 'sight' (152). In *Reeducated*, I am using a very liberal definition of text as image and image as text. In either case, the concept of *Reeducated* as a work of electronic literature is somewhat controversial, and is used to properly define what we talk about when we talk about visibility in electronic literature.

KEYWORDS

Picture Theory; ekphrasis; text-image relationship; Asian digital literature; minorities

RESUMO

Usando a "Teoria da Imagem" de W.J.T. Mitchell (1994), este artigo explora o uso da imagem visual na literatura eletrónica. Examina três trabalhos recentes que combinam múltiplos elementos mediáticos. O primeiro, *The Boat* (2015), é um romance gráfico interativo do artista visual vietnamita-australiano Matt Huynh. É adaptado do conto *The Boat* (2008) do autor vietnamita australiano Nam Le. Ao comparar a adaptação digital com o texto de origem, exploro noções contemporâneas de *ekphrasis* na literatura digital. Em segundo lugar, exploro *The Vine and the Fish* (2020), de Leise Hook, uma narrativa gráfica interativa. Aqui, examino não só a interação entre texto e imagem, mas também como esta obra usa a visibilidade como conceito central (ou seja, com as imagens da videira titular e do peixe). Finalmente, examino *Reeducated: Inside Xinjiang's Secret Detention Camps* (2021), um "filme animado e ambisónico 360 V.R. que

reconstrói a experiência de detenção e reeducação política em Xinjiang, China, guiado pelas memórias de três homens que foram apanhados naquela que é provavelmente a maior operação de internamento em massa de minorias étnicas e religiosas desde a Segunda Guerra Mundial" (Huynh 2023). A obra é dirigida por Sam Wolson e contém ilustrações de Matt Huynh. Ao discutir a *ekphrasis*, o anglo-americano e teórico dos média W.J.T. Mitchell (1994) descreve três fases: indiferença ecfrástica, esperança ecfrástica e desespero ecfrástico. A primeira, a indiferença ecfrástica, decorre da «perceção do senso comum de que a *ekphrasis* é impossível», de que as palavras podem «citar», mas nunca «dar a ver» (Mitchell 1994, 152). Em *Reeducated*, estou a utilizar uma definição muito liberal de texto como imagem e imagem como texto. Em ambos os casos, o conceito de *Reeducated* como uma obra de literatura eletrónica é um tanto controverso e é usado para definir adequadamente o que falamos quando falamos de visibilidade na literatura eletrónica.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE
Teoria da Imagem; ekphrasis; relação texto-imagem; literatura digital asiática; minorias

The Chinese character "biáng" (see Figure 1) is onomatopoeic. The sound reflects dough hitting a counter as noodles are formed. It is also one of the most complex characters in Chinese, with 58 strokes. It contains the radicals for horse, moon, heart, knife, eight, speech, and more. Biáng, however, is not even technically a Chinese character. Traditional Chinese dictionaries do not acknowledge it as it is something of a folk creation. No one even knows who created it, though some posit that it was Premier Li Si in the Qin dynasty, while others consider it a marketing tool of restauranteurs selling biángbiáng mian (Shaanxi noodles). Additionally, despite being added to Unicode in 2015, the character for biáng cannot be typed. Even the Wikipedia page does not show the character as a legible font. If one receives a receipt for biángbiáng noodles, even in China, it prints simply "BB." Within this essay, I am unable to type it into this essay, and have to rely on an image attachment. Is this an image or text? Is there a difference between the two? In either case, when the character biáng goes abroad digitally, something happens. It feels more at home on the page, or as an image file as represented in Figure 1. In his Stanford Commencement address, Steve Jobs comments on the importance of taking a calligraphy class at university:

> I learned about serif and sans-serif typefaces, about varying the space between different letter combinations, about what makes great typography great. It was beautiful. Historical. Artistically subtle in a way that science can't capture. And I found it fascinating. None of this had any hope of any practical application in my life. But ten years later, when we were designing the first Macintosh computer, it all came back to me. And we designed it all into the Mac. It was the first computer with beautiful typography. If I had never dropped in on that single course in college, the Mac would never have multiple typefaces or proportionally spaced fonts. And since Windows just copied the Mac, it's likely that no personal computer would have them. (Jobs 2005)

Jobs' inclusion of "beautiful typography" allows most European languages a level of beauty in digital space not afforded to other languages. In the case of Asian languages, the beauty of the calligraphy is often lost, and even at odds with digital space. I use this example of the character

"biáng" as a metaphor for the broader dilemma of Asian narratives in digital space. To combat this lack of visibility (literally and figuratively), many electronic literature practitioners have utilised digital visibility to better articulate and represent their respective voices. In this paper, I will explore three such examples: Matt Huynh's 2015 visual digital rendering of Nam Le's *The Boat* (2008), Leise Hook's *The Vine and the Fish* (2020), and the virtual reality experience *Re-educated: Inside Xinjiang's Secret Detention Camps* (2021) directed by Sam Wolson. In analysing these works I will look at the limits of what language is capable of representing, and how bringing together text and image can be complicated when the issue is the very possibility of representation.

In discussing the value of visibility, Italian author Italo Calvino distinguishes between two types of imaginative process: "the one that starts with the word and arrives at the visual image, and the one that starts with the visual image and arrives at its verbal expression" (Calvino 1988, 83). Calvino argues in favour of an imaginative process that starts with the visual and arrives at the verbal, making the case for a better understanding and control of the visual imagination. He argues that such a process would allow us to "control our own inner vision without suffocating it or letting it fall, on the other hand, into confused, ephemeral daydreams" (Calvino 1988, 92). He argues that such a text represents an "icastic" form. "Icastic" is an obsolete word in English, though common in Italian, meaning figurative. This literary treatment of the visible goes hand in hand with the ekphrastic tradition: the literary description/designation of particular work/s of art, which supposes, or at least aims towards, the belief that visual and verbal art can refer to one another and in doing so hint at something "actual," especially when the "original" artistic source is hard to determine, as in the case of William Blake's illuminated books. For example, in Blake's *The Tyger*, one is presented with both an illustration and a poem, but it is hard to determine which communication – i.e. language or illustration – is regarded as central or originating.

In discussing ekphrasis, American media theorist W.J.T. Mitchell describes three phases: ekphrastic indifference, ekphrastic hope, and ekphrastic despair. The first, ekphrastic indifference, stems from the "commonsense perception that ekphrasis is impossible," that words can "cite" but never "sight" (Mitchell 1994, 152). In the case of Blake's *The Tyger*, Mitchell, in a phase of "ekphrastic indifference," would argue that we should treat each part separately. The second, ekphrastic hope, is similar to Calvino's hope for a better understanding and control of the visual imagination. Mitchell argues that, in this phase, ekphrasis "ceases to be a special or exceptional moment in verbal or oral representation and begins to seem paradigmatic of a fundamental tendency in all linguistic expression"

(Calvino 1988, 153). This stage, Mitchell continues, inevitably leads to a third phase he labels "ekphrastic fear":

> a moment of resistance or counterdesire that occurs when we sense that the difference between the verbal and visual representation might collapse and the figurative, imaginary desire of ekphrasis might be realized literally and actually. [...] It is the moment in aesthetics when the difference between verbal and visual mediation becomes a moral, aesthetic imperative[...] (Mitchell 1994, 154)

Returning to the character "biáng," is it a verbal or visual mediation? Does it have more in common with Blake's illustration of *The Tyger* or the English alphabet's letter B on a noodle shop receipt? Mitchell concludes that from the semantic point of view, from the standpoint of referring, expressing intentions and producing effects in a viewer/listeners, there is no essential difference between texts and images and thus no gap between the media to be overcome by any special ekphrastic strategies:

> The mystery is why we have this urge to treat the medium as if it were the message, why we make the obvious, practical differences between these two media into metaphysical oppositions which seem to control our communicative acts, and which then have to be overcome with utopian fantasies like ekphrasis. (Mitchell 1994, 160–161)

If indeed there is no essential difference between text and images, and if ekphrasis as defined by Mitchell is simply a utopian fantasy, then the text/image relationship in digital space needs to be reassessed. In this essay I will attempt to do so by discussing visibility in three works of electronic literature that depict diasporic Asian narratives. I argue that contemporary Asian diasporic digital practitioners maintain a level of "ekphrastic hope" (as defined by Mitchell) to achieve a central goal of "overcoming otherness" (Mitchell 1994, 156).

The first work is developed through a process of digital, visual adaptation: Matt Huynh's rendering of Nam Le's short story *The Boat*. Nam Le is a Vietnamese-Australian who arrived in Australia when he was less than a year old, as a boat refugee. He worked as a corporate lawyer and was admitted to the Supreme Court of Victoria in 2003/2004. He attended the Iowa Writers' Workshop in the United States where he completed a Masters in Creative Writing. On his relationship with Vietnam, Le writes:

> My relationship with Vietnam is complex. For a long time I vowed I wouldn't fall into writing ethnic stories, immigrant stories, etc. Then I realized that not only was I working against these expectations (market, self, literary, cultural), I was working

against my kneejerk resistance to such expectations. How I see it now is no matter what or where I write about, I feel a responsibility to the subject matter. Not so much to get it right as to do it justice. Having personal history with a subject only complicates this — but not always, nor necessarily, in bad ways. I don't completely understand my relationship to Vietnam as a writer. This book is a testament to the fact that I'm becoming more and more okay with that. (Le 2023)

Le's short story *The Boat* was adapted by Matt Huynh, a New York-based Vietnamese-Australian artist, through funding of the Australian State Broadcasting Service. Huynh's illustrated essays, comics and animation interrogate the repercussions of war, with a focus on diasporic refugee narratives and the experiences of asylum seekers and migrant communities. Huynh's adaptation uses illustration, sound, and movement to visualise and dramatize Le's story. The question then is posed: is adaptation needed? Is Le's story not enough? Is it something that simply coexists with the original? Or does it extend Le's story further. In short, are Huynh's illustrations and digital framing requisite? In an interview with Guernica magazine Huynh tates:

The Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) approached me to do it. It's quite a revered piece of work that came with a lot of pressure to not get it wrong, so they wanted me to turn it into a graphic novel to experiment with building an interactive platform for it, which is a bit of a challenge because it's tricky enough to adapt from an existing prose work for the comic's language, and on top of that to build a language and a platform for it for the screen. I don't think we found all the answers, but we had to look at what was going on out there and then had to look at digital features and interactive features from news outlets and journalism magazines, along with other adaptations of the short story form, and cherry-picked the best parts and tried to make our own version with comics. (Huynh 2015)

Huynh's adaptation adds temporality and disruption. The "rocking" or movement of the text simulates the unpleasant claustrophobia and danger of a boat refugee. This is an aesthetic that continues throughout Huynh's illustration. It adds a disruption to the static nature and imaginative lethargy that one experiences with traditional print reading. The text even asserts at the beginning that it is a twenty-minute viewing experience. Thus, an urgency is created. There is also, not an excess of detail; Huynh's illustrations are "outlines" in Rachel Cusk's sense of the word, representations that still enable the reader to visually imagine beyond what has been provided. Huynh explains:

We chopped and changed and got rid of entire subplots and characters to make it suit the online space. But at its root it's pretty simple. It's just following a young teenage girl named Mai who escapes Vietnam after the Vietnam War on a fisherman's boat and encounters a young mother and her son and builds a relationship with them on the boat. The entire story happens at sea before the characters reach their new home and after leaving their old one. So a lot of the story takes place in this "in-between nothing" space where it's just vast ocean and vast sky. What attracted me to it was the obvious connection to my personal history. And then there was the desire to bring it into the current political climate and issues surrounding asylum seekers today. (Huynh 2015)

In other words, the illustrations don't "wholly" usurp the reader's visual imagination. Le's story is therefore made more temporal, more urgent in this digital literary adaptation. In describing ekphrastic hope, Mitchell goes further, arguing that underpinning 'ekphrastic hope' is a central goal of "overcoming otherness" (Mitchell 1994, 156). I argue that the works described in this essay hold to a form of ekphrastic hope in order to overcome otherness. The question for both versions of *The Boat* becomes: is the text not enough? The answer is troubling, especially to those of us who love traditional literature. The answer is no, the text is not enough.

Leise Hook's *The Vine and the Fish* won the Robert Coover Award in 2021 and was supported by the National Endowment for the Arts. The judges of the Coover award wrote that the work is:

A slowly-but-surely unfolding narrative reflection on the power of language to create and dissolve the boxes in which we put—or from which we can free—one another, carried along by an intimate story of movement, migration, and the unstoppable fecundity of life. The jury was struck by how well the writing, visual design, and simple yet exquisitely crafted interactivity work together to pull us ever further into Hook's world. (Marino 2021)

Hook is a Stockholm-based Asian-American cartoonist and illustrator. Her work has appeared in the following publications: *The Believer*, *The New Yorker*, and *Catapult*, and has been shortlisted for a National Magazine Award for Digital Storytelling and for the Cartoonist Studio Prize. In *The Vine and the Fish*, Hook starts with the visual image and arrives at its verbal expression: i.e. the titular vine and fish. Hook's work regards the visual as primary, the literary secondary. The carp is first known as "Asian carp," then "invasive carp," then "silverfin." The first change is made to remove (poorly) the negative connotations towards Asian-Americans, the second to remove the negative connotations so the fish can be sold. In a sense, Hook's work performs a Derridean reading of these terms, specifically the word

"invasive." "Let us not begin at the beginning, nor even at the archive," is the opening sentence of Derrida's short monograph titled *Archive Fever*, writes Vijay Mishra:

> If not at the archive, 'then where else?' any one trained in the basic tools of research methods would ask. We pause to have another look at Derrida's opening sentence and find that a paratactic second sentence follows it: 'But rather at the word "archive".' So we begin not at the archive – the depository – but 'at the *word* [my emphasis] "archive".' *Arkhē*, the Greek origin of the word, marks both a beginning (where things commence) and the place of a command, the latter a nomological principle, the principle of the law linked to power. In Derrida's deconstructive reading of the word, an archive becomes less straightforward, less stable (against our normative understanding of it as a repository, a library, a collection and so on) and a lot more problematic because the 'order of the commencement and the order of the commandment' do not necessarily follow the same logic. (Mishra 2016)

Here, Hook's work interrogates the word "invasive" as it is applied to these species. The visual, however, remains constant (consistency, too, is one of Calvino's cherished values for literature in this millennium). Invasive, Hook notes, applies also to viruses. She correlates this with the use of "invasion" in recent American political discourse. The connections here, are notable, but are perhaps best depicted by the narrator walking and being represented as vines, as pathogens, as lines. Again, like Huynh, the work literally "outlines" the narrator's bodily impression. Once again, in Hook's *The Vine and the Fish*, the text is not enough to represent Hook's Asian-American experience.

Inside Xinjiang's Prison State is a New Yorker article written/researched by Ben Mauk and illustrated by Matt Huynh. It is an article accompanied by digital illustrations. I say "accompany" because the traditional print text is central. In *Re-educated: Inside Xinjiang's Secret Detention Camps*, however, the illustration becomes central. This project was supported by the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, Eyebeam Center for the Future of Journalism and Online News Association. According to Huynh's website:

> The New Yorker's interactive feature investigating the secret re-education centers in Xinjiang, China – the largest internment of ethnic and religious minorities since World War II – and the surveillance, persecution and forced assimilation across Xinjiang. It is the New Yorker's most ambitious immersive visual storytelling project ever published. The multimedia project visualises stories and settings that have been inaccessible and never seen before, based on cross-referenced eyewitness accounts. (Huynh 2023)

It is a virtual-reality documentary that takes viewers inside Xinjiang's 2017-2018 secret detention camps for Uighurs and other predominantly Muslim minorities. It is likely the largest internment of ethnic and religious minorities since the Second World War. The VR work has voice-over of three detainee's accounts: Amanzhan Seituly, who flew to Beijing on business and was detained at the airport; Orynbek Koksebek, who was visiting family following the death of his father; and Erbaqyt Ortarbai, who was working as a truck driver for a Chinese mining company. Whether or not this is a work of "electronic literature" (as opposed to, say, a VR animated documentary) can be debated, but given its extension from a print work, its initial use of text that is usurped by the visuals and translated interviewee testimony, and using Mitchell's postmodern claim that there is "no essential difference between texts and images" I argue that the images themselves are "written" and that in the Venn diagram of the e-lit/VR documentary, it at very least bleeds into both camps.

I want to focus on two moments within the narrative. The first, is when one is in the perspective of the prisoners at the re-education "class". They are behind bars and are required to stand to sing the Chinese national anthem. In my initial "reading" of the work, I was in a swivel chair. When the prisoners stood, I found myself, involuntarily standing also. It was instantaneous, a kneejerk reaction. A reaction that is only possible with the visual. Similarly, when the detainees are forced to face the wall, so too is the "reader," forced to face the wall. One can turn around, and I in fact did, but it felt wrong, like a rule being broken, and I turned back to the wall. In 360 degree virtual space, what this work achieves is a poetics of claustrophobia. Despite freedom to move around, one feels trapped. One feels imprisoned. And yet at other moments within the work, with euphoric moments of freedom, one feels almost agoraphobic. In a 2021 interview, director Wolson states:

> There has to be a really good reason to tell the story in this way [...] it wasn't until (Mauk) found three people who had been at the same camp at the same time and had overlapping experiences and overlapping understandings of the architecture of the spaces that we realized: this was something that [...] VR would be uniquely suited to[.] (Wolson 2021)

Wolson claims that the result is "using some of the most cutting-edge storytelling tools that you can use, but we're bridging that sort of humanity by going back to some of the earliest versions of visual storytelling" (Wolson 2021). As argued above, the combination of the visual with the literary is nothing new, reaching as far back as 18th Century with William Blake, if not further.

What characterises all these digital visible works is that, despite fluency, they do not feel wholly comfortable in English, or at the very least they find it insufficient. I am reminded of V.S. Naipaul's quote as a student at Oxford in 1951 as a student at Oxford, in a paper on *Paradise Lost* read by Professor J.R.R. Tolkien, wrote the phrase: "Prayer, the incense for the incensed God." Naipaul explains, "Now I knew exactly what I was doing. 'Incensed' meaning angry, it's the same word. And Tolkien said to me, 'it's good, did you intend it?' And I was ashamed and I said no. And so I lost points in Tolkien's mind, I suppose, and the witticism yet was my own" (Bewes 2002). Here, digital visibility enables these authors to express something beyond, or at the very least in addition to, the limitations of the English language. In other words, the text – at least for these artists – is not enough. Reading the testimonies of the subjects in *Re-educated: Inside Xinjiang's Secret Detention Camps* could never get me to literally stand up out of my seat when reading. I have never had a kneejerk reaction of this sort to a work of traditional literature. I have never been so immersed that I feel compelled to stand up out of my chair. Only the visual can achieve this.

I want to finish by returning to the character "biáng." In Sichuan province, a professor Wang Sijun punished tardy students by making them write out the character for "biáng" a thousand times. The students went crazy having to write the character over and over again, and were never late again. But perhaps, here too, through digital visibility, we can resolve this issue, which is what I attempted to do, with Chris Arnold, for the digital zine *Taper*. *Taper* is an online literary journal for computational poetry and literary art published twice yearly by Bad Quarto (2023). It publishes computational poems and works that are not more than 2048 bytes, and do not make reference to any external libraries or APIs, nor link to any external resources, including fonts. Each work is licensed as free software for others to use, study, modify, and share. With Arnold, I created "tardy student punishment simulator," that makes visible the biáng character a thousand times. Here, perhaps, the character can finally feel represented and visible in digital space. Is this repeated character text? Is it an image? I would argue that it is the latter. And I would argue that the latter is essential to electronic literary works. This is highly problematic to a field that has pollinated from predominantly literary fields. The role of visibility is fundamental to electronic literature and a visual literacy will need to be cultivated moving forward. Yet the traditional poet and author in me remains sceptical of my conclusions. I end with a poem on the Chinese character "biáng," one that starts with the visual of the Chinese character and arrives at verbal expression:

No one knows who created
the Chinese character
for biáng.

Perhaps it was Premier Li Si in the Qin dynasty
or a noodle shop owner to advertise
biángbiáng noodles.

The character for biáng contains fifty-eight brush strokes
and includes the radicals for horse, moon, heart, knife, eight, speech...
Numerous variations on the character exist.

Biángbiáng noodles contain various ingredients:
pak choy, garlic, chilli flakes, cooking oil, ground Sichuan pepper, soy sauce...
Numerous variations on the dish exist.

Biáng is the sound made
when slapping pulled dough
to make noodles.

A university professor in Sichuan punishes tardy students
by making them write biáng
a thousand times: biáng biáng biáng biáng biáng biáng biáng biáng biáng biáng...

The students go crazy.
They hate having to write the character
over and over again: biáng biáng biáng biáng biáng biáng biáng biáng biáng biáng...

We have elegant fonts on computers
because Steve Jobs took calligraphy at university
and added them to the Apple Macintosh,

but despite being added to Unicode in 2015
the character for biáng
cannot be typed.

When I order
biángbiáng noodles in Shaanxi
the receipt just prints BB

and when I read it I wonder
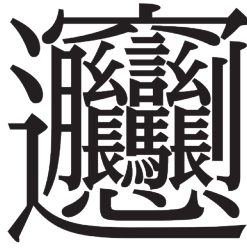if such a needlessly complex character
will ever be conceived of again.

Fig. 1: The Chinese character "biáng"

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